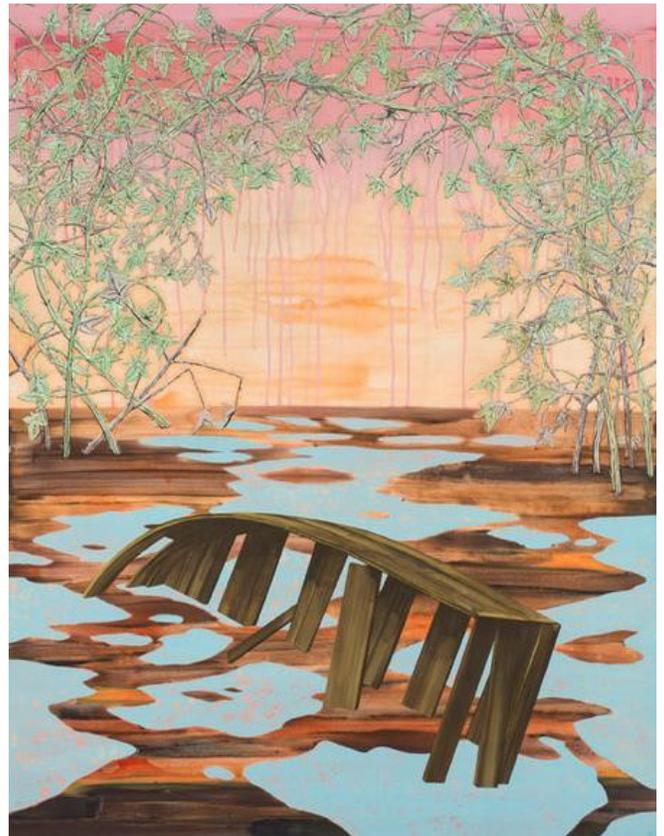


Portland Wild Life: The Work of Ryan Pierce

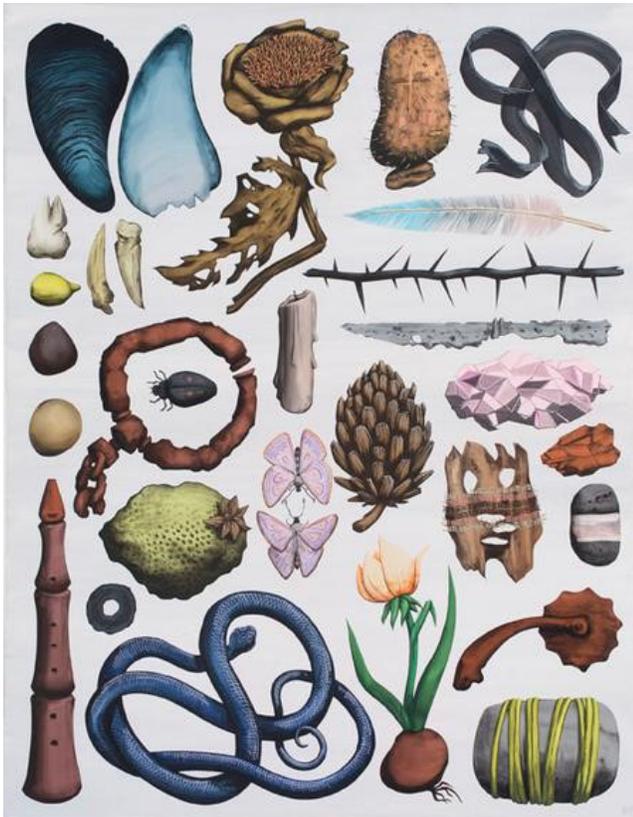
by Melanie Flood

The ecology of the place we live in helps define who we are, and it can either enrich or degrade our sense of purpose and security in the world. Portland artist and ecological activist Ryan Pierce grew up in the majestic redwood forests of Northern California amid the political violence surrounding the Timber Wars of the 1990s, when environmental activists went head-to-head with loggers and timber companies in an attempt to protect the habitat of the endangered northern spotted owl. A car-bombing attempt on the life of environmentalist and activist Judi Bari, the mother of one of Pierce's friends, set the tone for his interest and involvement in environmental justice and activism. When Pierce moved to Portland in 1999 to enter the undergraduate program at the Oregon College of Art and Craft, he began volunteering with groups defending Mount Hood National Forest. Through these experiences, the major themes of Pierce's paintings and installations began to emerge: human resilience, our relationship with nature, and the lost balance of our ecosystem. A prolific artist, Pierce has exhibited his work in thirteen solo exhibitions in the United States and abroad over the past ten years; he has two upcoming exhibitions in Portland in 2016.

Pierce's work vividly reimagines the world in the aftermath of cataclysmic climate change. Influenced by intensive research into environmental theory, his large-scale paintings depict complex new "natural" landscapes. Neither as apocalyptic nor as hopelessly dark as one might imagine, Pierce's work expresses faith in human resilience, and his hope for a world in which humans live in harmony with Earth's flora and fauna. In his painting *Los Angeles* (2013), the remains of a wooden rowboat extrude from the last puddles of water in an evaporating riverbed. The viewer is left to wonder what happened to the people in the boat: Where were they venturing, and did they make it there? Behind the boat, a thorny mint-green vine forms a trellis framing a sherbet-colored sunset; the background melts away in pink inks that drip down toward the horizon like car-wash foam coating a windshield. These iconographic elements become symbols as Pierce repeats them throughout his paintings, building a visual vocabulary that evokes the migration caused by global warming and the ravages of human industry.



*Ryan Pierce. Los Angeles, 2013. Ink and Flashe on canvas over panel.
Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery*



Ryan Pierce, *From the Pockets of the Wanderer*, 2014. Flashe on canvas over panel. Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland

Pierce's 2014 exhibition at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, *Sad Gods*, was inspired by the journals of explorers and conquistadors. *El Dorado* (2014) is a grid of nine blank panels that were activated by gallery visitors. Pierce invited visitors to "experience exploration" by following a set of elaborately written directions that guided them along challenging nature hikes in search of hidden treasure—his painted panels. Visitors retrieved the paintings and brought them to the gallery. Ryan positioned each painting in nature as generous bait to encourage people to spend time in Oregon forests unprotected by wilderness status; each visitor who retrieved a painting from the woods was allowed to keep the painting at the close of the exhibition. The project was designed to build viewers' awareness of the need to preserve the forests, while also offering them a rich aesthetic experience and a unique opportunity to complete Pierce's exhibition and collect his work. Pierce's exploration directions were both pragmatic and poetic:

Begin where Quartz Creek enters the Lewis River and hike north along the Quartz Creek Trail. You'll pass a broken bridge at the first tributary. The grade gets steep and you might be breathing hard by the time you reach Straight Creek. Admire the smooth varicolored rock surface beneath the water. The water is delicious.

There's a rumor—difficult to substantiate—that the world's second-largest Douglas fir grows somewhere in the Straight Creek drainage. Ponder this as you climb back into the forest, still following the trail north, amid fallen giants cleaved through by the trail crews. The timber companies have had their eye on this spot for decades. At about four miles you'll cross Snagtooth Creek on a couple of fallen saplings.

As you climb out of Snagtooth Canyon you'll pass a campsite to your left. Just past this site the main trail switches back and you'll see a faint spur that continues, heading up the canyon, parallel to Snagtooth Creek. Follow this as best you can, keeping the creek within earshot. The trail often fades or is blocked by colossal nurse logs.

You keep checking in on the creek and before long you hear the roar of the waterfall. Fifty yards before the falls you make your way down the loamy bank and then up the creek bed, hopping rock to rock or maybe taking your shoes off. There are some nice swim places here, although pretty icy.

At last you reach Snagtooth Falls. Your view of it is bisected by a giant log, jackknifed and sprouting ferns and saplings. Look left, to the cliff edge of the basin. Erosion has created two parabola-shaped cutbanks, like surprised eyebrows, with roots dangling out. Way up under the left eyebrow you'll find your quarry, wrapped in black plastic. But the real treasure is all around you, right?

Pierce is also one of the founders of Signal Fire, a groundbreaking nature-based nonprofit residency project. “What if the wilderness was your studio?” asks the Signal Fire website. Pierce’s affinity for solitude, nature, and communal experience are imparted to participants through Signal Fire’s guided expeditions deep into the American West. Pierce started the group along with activist and public land advocate Amy Harwood in an effort “to merge their respective communities to turn activists on to the potential of using artistic strategies in their work, and introduce artists to the resources of public land as a way to support and inspire their work.” Since 2009, Signal Fire has provided opportunities for artists to venture into nature and wander. Pierce’s Signal Fire trips are both creative and intellectual. Pierce



Signal Fire, “Unwalking the West: Siskiyou,” [Ryan Pierce on left, artist Megan Hanley on right]. 2016. About the project: “We started our season in a crystalline watershed of the Siskiyou Mountains. The Siskiyou, spanning the California-Oregon border, are the largest subrange of the Klamath Mountains. 11 artists hiked along the namesake river of famed mountain man Jedediah Smith, using his journal and others’ observations as a point of departure to discuss the complexities of a region rife with paradox. We were joined on the first day by botanist Jeanine Moy from KS Wild.”

incorporates contextual readings and seminar conversations into group activities with visiting artists and activists. Signal Fire’s self-directed Outpost Residency is a nomadic artists’ colony that takes place in a different campsite each year. Participants are free to work, hike, or relax during the day, then meet in the evening to share dinner. Pierce spends months in the backcountry each year, using the time to recalibrate, gain inspiration, and convert urbanites into ardent lovers of nature.

In an interview with the author, Pierce cites Portland’s “progressive politics, political resistance, and self-sufficiency” as important values that draw him to the city. Portland’s campaign to encourage swimming in the Willamette River and the city’s recent moratorium on new fossil fuel infrastructure projects are two major steps toward preserving the health of Portland’s environment. During the fall of 2015 Pierce returned to school, relocating his studio to the Portland State University Art Department, as the inaugural resident artist in the Contemporary Art Practice program. As a first-year graduate student, I’ve had the opportunity to work alongside him, peeking at unfinished works and watching his ideas unfold on canvas. Pierce’s presence as an artist, activist, and friend has contributed a wealth of knowledge and calm to our MFA community at Portland State, and to Portland’s larger artistic ecosystem. His sense of humor, enthusiasm, and persistent hope in light of the challenges facing our planet have made many of us in Portland—and beyond—far more aware of our responsibility to care for ourselves, each other, and the world we inhabit. As environmental issues become increasingly critical, innovative ecological perspectives and practices like Pierce’s will only grow in importance within the fields of visual art and activism.

Melanie Flood (born 1979 Manhasset, New York) is an artist based in Portland. She holds a BFA (2001) in Photography from the School of Visual Arts in New York and is a Contemporary Art Practice MFA (2017) candidate at Portland State University. Since 2008, she directs Melanie Flood Projects, which began as an artists’ salon located in her Brooklyn residence. In 2014, the gallery relaunched in downtown Portland, OR expanding its programming to include sculpture, sound installation and video. Recent projects include Robert Rhee: Disambiguation, Please, Justin James Reed: Shining Bodies, Maria Antelman: A Non Existent Event, and the series Thinking Through Photography, a survey of

photographic practices highlighting experimental and diverse approaches in which artists work featuring Leif Anderson, Teresa Christiansen, Rose Dickson & Dru Donovan. Her projects have been featured in Art in America, The New York Times, New York Magazine, Zingmagazine, Photo District News, among others. Recent presentations of her work include NADA Art Basel Fourteen30 Contemporary, Miami Beach, FL (2016), Carl & Sloan Contemporary, Portland, OR (2016) and Newspace Center for Photography, Portland, OR (2014). Flood is the recipient of a Regional Arts & Culture Council Project Grant (2014) and the recipient of a Precipice Fund Award (2016).

This essay was edited by Stephanie Snyder, and is among a series of essays commissioned for the Visual Arts Ecology Project by The Ford Family Foundation and Oregon Arts Commission with Editors Stephanie Snyder, John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director, The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery; and Sue Taylor, Associate Dean, College of the Arts and Professor of Art History, Portland State University. The commissioning institutions share a goal to strengthen the visual arts ecology in Oregon, and a key interest of increasing the volume of critical writing on art in our region.